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U.S. ATTORNEY: CHILD SMUGGLERS FACE STIFF PENALTIES

PHOENIX – In an interview Monday with Univision, U.S. Attorney Paul K. Charlton highlighted the dangers faced by children smuggled across the border from Mexico, and sent a warning to those who might think smuggling a child across the border is doing someone a favor.

U.S. Attorney Charlton said “Each of these cases originates with the parents’ desire to bring their child to live with them in the United States. What these parents do not fully understand is that their wish to reunite with their children may, in fact, be putting their child’s life at risk. The border is a dangerous place, and adults risk their lives when they cross illegally. Children’s lives are at greater risk, and that risk is exponentially increased when the children are put in the hands of coyotes. Because the risk to children is so very great, we have a zero tolerance policy for these cases.”

A rapid rise in recent federal child smuggling cases have shown the extent to which people are willing to go, sometimes turning their infant children over to organized alien smugglers, in order to move their families into the United States illegally. Smugglers often pay U.S. citizens or permanent resident aliens a few hundred dollars to smuggle a child, usually by falsely claiming to be the child’s parent at the port of entry. Those apprehended and prosecuted have faced on average 15 months in prison, and for legal permanent residents, the sentence is usually followed by deportation, with a slim possibility of ever returning to the United States. In addition, those who attempt to reenter illegally face up to 20 years in prison if caught illegally reentering. U.S. Attorney Charlton said smugglers often paint a sympathetic portrait of what is really a profit-making enterprise. They lure those who can freely travel across the border by saying they are doing a family a favor.

Some recent examples of cases involving smuggled children include:

On January 26, 2007, Veronica Vega-Montes, 29, a citizen of Mexico and resident of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, was sentenced to 15 months in prison, by U.S. District Judge Cindy K. Jorgenson. Vega-Montes had pleaded guilty on October 12, 2006, to Conspiracy to Transport Illegal Aliens for Profit. Vega-Montes admitted that on August 6, 2006, she applied for admission into the United States at the Douglas Port of Entry, accompanying a 10-year old girl. She claimed the girl was her daughter and presented her own daughter's DPS-150 laser visa. In secondary inspection, Vega-Montes admitted that she was to be paid \$200 to bring the girl into the United States and drive her to the Family Dollar store in Douglas, Ariz., where she was going to give her to an unknown woman.

CASE NUMBER: CR-06-1491-TUC-CKJ

On January 23, 2007, Cincia Oralía Mendoza-Villa, 24, a citizen of Mexico and resident of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, was sentenced to 9 months in prison, by U.S. District Judge Raner C. Collins. Mendoza-Villa had pleaded guilty on November 8, 2006, to Conspiracy to Transport Illegal Aliens

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for Profit. Mendoza-Villa admitted that on September 6, 2006, she and two other people, Ana Luz Lopez de Villa and Julio Cesar Villa-Lopez, applied for admission into the United States at the Douglas Port of Entry, accompanying by two girls, ages 4 and 6. At primary inspection, Mendoza-Villa submitted her own daughter's laser visa as belonging to one of the children; and Lopez de Villa provided a birth certificate that was falsely presented for the other girl. All three adults knew that they were illegally smuggling the girls into the United States. Mendoza-Villa was to be paid \$300 after the girls were smuggled into the United States and delivered to an unknown person at the Dollar Store in Douglas, Ariz. Mendoza-Villa's co-defendants have both pleaded guilty to the same charge and are scheduled for sentencing before Judge Collins. Her aunt, Ana Luz Lopez de Villa, pleaded guilty on January 9, 2007, and is set for sentencing on March 26, 2007. Her cousin, Julio Cesar Villa-Lopez, pleaded guilty on October 30, 2006, and is set for sentencing on February 23, 2007.

CASE NUMBER: CR-06-1653-TUC-RCC-CRP

On January 12, 2007 Ana Dolores Meza-Montano, of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, was sentenced to 15 months in prison and two years of supervised release. Meza-Montano had pleaded guilty to conspiring to transport an illegal alien on October 30, 2006. On September 8, 2006, Meza-Montano presented herself for admission into the United States at the port of entry in Douglas, Arizona. Meza-Montano was accompanied by a one year old female who she claimed was her daughter. Meza-Montano also presented a border crossing card in her daughter's name. Further investigation revealed that the child was not Meza-Montano's daughter and did not have authorization to enter the United States. According to Meza-Montano, she was offered \$100 to smuggle the child into the U.S., and deliver her to a unknown man in a yellow shirt at the Wal-Mart.

CASE NUMBER: CR-06-01654-TUC-CKJ

On January 9, 2007, Yajaira Denise Rivera, 21, Chandler, Ariz., was sentenced to 15 months in prison. Rivera had pleaded guilty on October 17, 2006, to Conspiracy to Transport Illegal Aliens for Profit. Rivera admitted that she attempted to smuggle a one and a half year old baby through the DeConcini Port of Entry in Nogales, Arizona on May 2, 2006 by presenting false birth certificate. Rivera admitted she had contacted a man known as "Nacho" to make arrangements to smuggle the minor male, whose name she did not know and whom she received from an unknown male and female in "Telas Parisina" in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, into the United States for \$500 and was to make arrangement to drop off the boy in Phoenix, Arizona once across the border.

CASE NUMBER: CR 06-1014-TUC-RCC-JM

On January 8, 2007, Ricardo Genaro Herrera, 24, of West Columbia, South Carolina, and Annabelle Palomino, 25, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, were sentenced after pleading guilty to conspiring to transport illegal aliens. Herrera was sentenced to 18 months in prison, and three years of supervised release, and Palomino was sentenced to 15 months in prison, and three years of supervised release. Both Herrera and Palomino had pleaded guilty to the charge. On May 10, 2006, Herrera and Palomino had presented themselves for admission into the United States at the port of entry in Naco, Arizona. They were accompanied by a two children, an 18 month old male and a three year old female, who Palomino claimed were her children. Palomino claimed that both she and the children were U.S. citizens. Further investigation revealed that the children were Mexican citizens, and that Herrera was to receive \$1500.00 to smuggle the children into the United States and take them to

South Carolina. The investigation also revealed that Herrera had agreed to give Palomino a portion of the money for her assistance in smuggling the children.

CASE NUMBER: CR-06-01051 -TUC-JMR

On January 5, 2007, Josephina Moreno-Clavel, 38, a citizen of Mexico and resident of Phoenix, was sentenced to 15 months, after she pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Transport Illegal Aliens for Profit. Moreno-Clavel admitted that on February 23, 2006, she and co-defendant Monique Marie Carrera applied for admission into the United States via the Nogales Port of Entry, transporting two minor children in the car, a three-year old female and a one-year-old male. Both children were dressed as girls, and Carrera presented her own daughter's and niece's U.S. birth certificates to the Inspector on behalf of the children. Moreno-Clavel admitted in secondary inspection that neither she nor Carrera were related to the children, and that they were hired by the childrens' grandmother smuggle the children into the United States and transport them within the United States. I expected to be paid \$200. I knew the children were Mexican citizens with no legal authorization to be in the United States." Moreno-Clavel's co-defendant, Monique Marie Carrera, had previously pled guilty to the same charge, and was sentenced on August 29, 2006, to a term of 15 months imprisonment.

CASE NUMBER: CR-06-0599-TUC-JMR-JM

The investigations in the above cases were all conducted by United States Customs and Border Protection. The prosecutions were handled by Mary Sue Feldmeier, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Tucson.

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